

RAY RUSHTON DISTINGUISHED LECTURER SERIES*

*Remarks of Featured Speaker:***

CIVILITY

ANTHONY T. KRONMAN†

Is the spirit of civility dying in America? Many people think so. They say that our public discourse has become intemperate and mean; that tolerance and generosity are now rare in political debate; that the process of lawmaking is increasingly dominated by a ruthless partisanship whose expressions are barely distinguishable from physical violence; that candidates today ignore their opponents' ideas and attack their personalities instead, with *ad hominem* arguments of the cruelest and least charitable kind; that our whole public life has become degraded and harsh. The symptoms of this, they say, are visible wherever we look: in the venomous provocations of radio talk show hosts; in the lewd curiosities of the tabloid press; in the personal assaults that today pass for campaign advertising; in the sarcasm and anger of political argument generally. Even the President (who is of course hardly a disinterested party) has complained about the growing incivility of American politics, and blamed the increasing violence of our words for the real acts of terror which, he says, our discourse anticipates and produces.

The President is right. There *has* been a loss of civility in America, but not in the way or for the reasons he implies. If we equate civility, as many people do, with decorum, with temperateness of speech, with politeness and a high-minded determination not to descend from principles to personalities, then the current period of American politics must be judged about as civil as any other, which is to say, about as civil as an energetic and heterogeneous democracy like ours can ever attain, or ought even to view as ideal. Our politicians have

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† Dean, Yale Law School.

always assaulted each other's characters and insulted each other's ideas. There has always been a tabloid press, specializing in tales of greed and sex. Even our most respectable papers have generally treated politics as a sport, with few or no holds barred. We have always been an uncivil people, fascinated by the prurient detail, appreciative of a well-aimed insult, inclined to put candor before politeness and accustomed to a violence of speech that has often foreshadowed violence in fact. In all these respects, we are today no different than we have ever been in the past.

Indeed, there is some reason to think that, so far as rudeness and vulgarity are concerned, the situation has actually improved. Even our most vicious political cartoonists, for example, do not compare with their predecessors in the last century, who exploited every ethnic and religious prejudice available to skewer their targets. Even the most lurid accounts of Bill Clinton's sex life seem timid by comparison with the pornographic stories the French revolutionaries published about Marie Antoinette. And even the angriest political quarrel no longer ends in a duel, a real if decorous form of violence unimaginable today.

But rudeness and vulgarity are not susceptible of close measurement, and judgments about their rise or fall must always be subject to doubt. We have to accept the possibility, therefore, that our public life has indeed become harsher and less polite, as the President and others claim. Still, even if this is so, it is not a cause for unqualified regret, since rudeness has its uses too, at least in our political culture. We are a democratic people, unaccustomed to deference and the forms of genteel respect, and our rough ways of talking help to keep us all, and our leaders especially, on a humbling plane. If we equate civility with politeness, therefore, the claim that we have lost a virtue we once possessed seems dubious as a matter of fact, and it is hard to justify the moral concern this claim is meant to arouse. So long as we identify civility with politeness in public debate, there is little reason to believe that we are now experiencing anything like a crisis of civility in American life. Whether they mean to or not, those who draw this equation thus lend support to the apostles of complacency who are forever reassuring us that there is nothing new or disturbing about our present situation. But there *is* a crisis of civility in America today, though we cannot begin to understand its scope and character until we abandon the popular

but shallow equation of civility with politeness and recall its original meaning instead.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) gives “politeness” as a secondary meaning of the word “civility,” but its root sense, according to the *OED*, is “the art of civil government”: a direct translation of the Latin word *civilitas*, which itself, as the *OED* points out, translates an older Greek word, *politike*—the skill of participating in the affairs of a *polis*, or city. We can start by noting something obvious about this art: that, like other arts, it is not a power human beings possess by nature and need no education or discipline to acquire. The ability to breathe is a natural power the exercise of which does not require conscious cultivation. Every art, by contrast, demands both experience and training, and civility is no exception. The art of civil government requires, in fact, a great deal of experience—more than many other arts, like that of calculation, for example—which is why Aristotle believed there can be prodigies in mathematics but none in political affairs. (Of course, Aristotle also believed that man is by nature a “political animal,”¹ and hence that the cultivation of civility is for human beings the fulfillment of a natural destiny—making man the only earthly creature whose nature is realized through art, through the conscious application of intelligence or mind to its own given vital powers.)

A cook prepares food; a poet makes poems; an architect designs buildings. Each of these activities has its own characteristic product and each its special art—the art of producing the product in question. By analogy we might say that citizens make government—the whole assemblage of laws, customs, executive decisions, adjudications, and the like that constitute what Aristotle called the *politeia*,² or constitution, of a community—and that civility is the art of making these things. Like the cook’s art and the poet’s, the citizen’s art calls for discriminating judgments of many sorts: judgments, for example, about which laws are best, and how they ought to be applied. These judgments are often quite complex, and require extensive knowledge, well-developed perceptual powers, and a keen moral sense, not unlike the judgments that other important human activities require. The exercise of political judgment is, moreover, a pleasure in its own right, an immedi-

¹ ARISTOTLE, *POLITICS*, 1253a2.

² *Id.* at 1278b10.

ate source of satisfaction to the person who possesses it (like the arts of poetry and cooking), and its development requires that the would-be practitioner of the citizen's art first learn to take an interest in its product, in the good that it produces, just as practitioners of poetry and cooking must start by learning to take an interest in poems and food. In this respect, the art of civil government displays the same circular psychology as other arts, depending for its initial development on the arousal of an interest that the exercise of the developed art rewards. In the case of civility, this is an interest in government or, as we say, in the *res publica*, in public things. This interest is both the foundation of the art of civil government and its target or goal, at once its source and object. The interest that forms the basis of civility, in this double sense, is an interest in what eighteenth century writers called the public good: the public-spirited desire to advance the good of the laws that the citizen's art produces.

These are propositions basic to the republican tradition of thought that has its beginnings in Aristotle's political philosophy and whose teachings played a crucial if limited role in the creation of the American system of government. But however clear these axioms may seem, they are all subject to doubt, and in particular the last, the postulation of an interest in the public good as the foundation of the citizen's art. Those who followed Aristotle in the republican tradition assumed the existence of such an interest and sought to explain it by contrast with another, the interest that everyone takes in his or her own private welfare. Sometimes we favor a law, they said, because we think it will make us richer or safer or enhance our individual prestige. And sometimes we favor a law because we believe it to be best for our community, all things considered, even if it makes us poorer or less secure or deprives us of some previously-held honor. In the first case, our judgment is based upon calculations of self-interest, but in the second upon an interest in the public good. Judgments of the second sort imply a willingness to subordinate or sacrifice our private welfare to that of the community as a whole, and only when we form our judgments on this basis are we practicing the art of civil government, as classical republicanism conceived it. To be sure, our judgments are often mixed, combining elements of public-spiritedness and self-interest in different proportions. But the distinction between these has always seemed clear to republican thinkers, and fundamental to the meaning of civility itself.

The clarity of this distinction has been challenged, however, on at least two separate grounds. First, it is now often said that appeals to the public interest are always and only disguised efforts to advance the private good of the person making the appeal. The modern “masters”³ of suspicion (Paul Ricoeur’s well-chosen phrase) have taught us to regard the seemingly selfless judgments of those who claim to have only their community’s welfare at heart as a subtle ideological trick designed to advance the interests of their economic class; or as deference to a superego created to shield themselves from the world; or as the expression of a slave morality that empowers the weak by enabling them to advance their selfish interests under color of a false concern for others. Our intellectual culture has been deeply shaped by these ideas. Today when we hear someone invoke the public good, our first reaction is often to ask what private interest this masks, and to search for the real motive of the statement, below the surface of expression, in some other and more self-centered concern. The depths having been revealed to us, we now find it more difficult to take the surface seriously, to credit at face value the claim that one is acting for the sake of the public good and not out of private interest instead. Suspicious as we are, this claim has become for us quite literally incredible, and we cannot keep ourselves from asking what selfish subterranean purpose it conceals (which is very different from accepting the *bona fides* of the claim but disagreeing with the conception of the public good it states).

A second line of attack on the classical distinction between private interest and public good stresses the fact—for that is what we now take it to be—that every political judgment, like every aesthetic and (in the view of many) every moral judgment too, is always offered from a specific point of view or, as we are now accustomed to saying, from a particular perspective. If ours is an age of suspicion, it is also the age of the perspective—the age, as Heidegger called it, of the *weltanschauung* or “world-picture.”⁴ We have grown accustomed to the idea that every judgment about the public good is rendered from a vantage point which the person making the judgment occupies but others—whose social class, tastes, personal history

³ PAUL RICOEUR, FREUD 32 (1970).

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *The Age of the World Picture*, in *THE QUESTION CONCERNING TECHNOLOGY AND OTHER ESSAYS* 115 (1977).

and form of life are different—do not. We have grown used to translating every statement of the form, “the public good requires thus and such,” into a perspectival claim: “the public good, as so-and-so conceives it from his point of view, requires thus and such.” The public good is by definition something common, something different people share, but perspectives are not: they vary from one person to the next and indeed, in the end, are unique. No two people share exactly the same outlook on life. In this sense, a person’s perspective is private; it is something that belongs to him alone. Because all judgments about the public good are perspectival, it is therefore tempting to infer that they are all essentially private in nature, that every claim about the public good is just the statement in misleadingly common—that is to say, objective—terms of a private point of view. Those who draw this inference are likely to conclude that appeals to the public good are not at all what they seem, and that arguments about its meaning are really just conflicts between private perspectives in disguise. Along with the habits of suspicion that Marx, Freud and Nietzsche have taught us, the increasingly radical forms of perspectivism that have gained intellectual currency in recent years make the distinction between public good and private interest, which once seemed so clear, murkier and harder to defend, and by doing so throw in doubt the understanding of civility on which the republican tradition of political thought was based.

There are answers to these doubts, however, that deprive them of much of their sting. First, as to perspectivism, one may respond that even if every claim about the public good is a claim from a private point of view, this does not itself make the claim in question a claim *about* the point of view from which it issues. The claim itself may be shaped—deeply shaped—by the private experiences, attitudes, and preferences of the person making it, but it does not *refer* to these shaping influences themselves. What it refers to is the public good: that is what philosophers call its intentional object, the thing the claim purports to be a claim about. Of course, a person may also make a statement *about* how things appear to him, from his own private point of view. In that case, it is his perspective and not some state of affairs that he believes to be independent of this perspective (such as the public good) to which his statement refers—that forms the intentional object of his statement. These claims have different objects, they refer to different things, and hence have different meanings: they convey different thoughts and are interpreted differently by

those to whom they are addressed. If the distinction between public good and private perspective is entirely erased, this difference of meaning disappears, and the sense of these claims is lost: they become, strictly speaking, unintelligible. Hence even if every judgment about the public good is a judgment from a private point of view, the distinction between public good and private perspective is needed to make sense of these judgments themselves, whose perspectival character therefore cannot be a reason for collapsing this distinction or denying its existence. In Kantian terms, acceptance of the distinction is a condition necessary for the possibility of rendering perspectival judgments about the public good intelligible at all.

Something similar may be said about the techniques of suspicion, which encourage us to view public-spirited statements regarding the common good as expressions of private interest of an economic or psychological kind. Do not be misled by the appearance of public-spiritedness, the practitioners of these methods all say; appeals to the common good are really just devices for the satisfaction of some antecedent private need—the need to protect one's property, or power or ego. But even if we assume that appeals of this sort all serve a private interest of some kind, the very fact that they do shows that the notion of the common good has value for someone—for the person making the appeal, in some cases, and for those to whom the appeal is addressed in others. For if this notion had no value for anyone at all, appeals to it could serve no interest even of the most private and self-centered sort. To put it crudely: if I want to persuade you to do something because it will benefit me, I must appeal to the things you care about; hence if, along with other considerations of a purely self-interested kind, I appeal to some notion of the common good, this itself suggests that you care about the common good, to some degree at least. Even if we regard such appeals, therefore, with a maximum of suspicion, and always begin by asking what private interest they conceal, it is impossible to understand their structure without assuming the very thing that a strategy of perfect suspicion appears to deny, namely, an interest in the public good. Thus here, too, the distinction between private interest and public-spiritedness is needed to understand the meaning of human words and actions even on a view of them that seeks to reduce the second to the first. It remains a condition of their intelligibility, which is just a more

abstract (Kantian) way of restating La Rochefoucauld's famous observation that "hypocrisy is the tribute vice pays to virtue."⁵

The distinction between private interest and public good thus survives both the philosophies of suspicion and the perspectivist arguments that together have done so much to discredit this distinction and the traditional concept of civility founded upon it. But the most serious challenge to this concept comes not from these quarters, but from a novel theory of politics, first presented in a systematic way by Thomas Hobbes, which denies that civility is a condition of government and thus makes it irrelevant to the problems of political life. Hobbes did not attempt to show that public-spiritedness is impossible (in the way, for example, that certain extreme forms of perspectivism suggest). What he sought to show is merely that it is unnecessary to the establishment of government, which can and will exist whether or not any of those living under it are public-spirited in the sense of being prepared to put the welfare of their political communities before their own. According to Hobbes, the institutions of government are best thought of as the outcome of a real or imagined agreement whose main function is to pacify the world so that its human inhabitants can continue to pursue, in peace and safety, the various activities in which they are already (that is, pre-politically) engaged. Politics, on Hobbes' view, has instrumental value only. It is not an arena of self-fulfillment in which essential human powers are developed and deployed, to the enjoyment of those who possess them; it is not, as Aristotle claimed, a source of intrinsic satisfaction in a complete human life. Nor, even more importantly, does the realm of politics depend for its existence on the public-spiritedness—the civility—of the citizens that occupy it, again, as Aristotle argued. Aristotle said that a city can survive only if a significant number of its citizens are prepared to sacrifice themselves on its behalf. Hobbes insists, by contrast, that governments are held together by self-interest, not patriotic love. He argues that governments are formed and maintained by individuals looking to their own welfare alone, and that no other motive is required to produce the habits of loyalty and law-abidingness in which the cohesion of government consists. On this Hobbesian view of politics, civility is not inconceivable,

⁵ FRANÇOIS, DUE DE LA ROCHEFOUCAULD, MAXIMES No. 218 (1678), quoted in THE OXFORD DICTIONARY OF QUOTATIONS 410 (Angela Partington ed., 4th ed. 1992).

it is merely irrelevant. By severing the connection between public-spiritedness, on the one hand, and the existence of the public realm on the other, Hobbes reduces civility to a common level with other private pursuits and transforms it, we might say, into a hobby.

Republican thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries recognized in Hobbes' contractarian theory of government a grave threat to their own conception of public life. Against Hobbes' demotion of civility—his claim that public-spiritedness is unnecessary to the establishment of civil order—they continued to insist that it *is* necessary, and that any political regime unsupported by civility is bound to become corrupt and unstable. If self-interest is the only motive citizens possess, they argued, the temptation to exploit the laws and other institutions of government for private advantage will be irresistible and no scheme of detection and punishment can be devised that will make the public order invulnerable to such exploitation, to corruption by those seeking to bend and manipulate the laws for private gain. The inevitable result of universal self-interest, they said, is thus the destruction of government itself, as more and more people rush to exploit it or to protect themselves against the depredations of others—the only sure protection against the corruption and instability of government being, on a republican view of things, a sufficient degree of public-spiritedness among governors and governed alike. This view lay at the heart of the Old Whig conception of good government that played such an important role in the English politics of the late eighteenth century and that deeply influenced the outlook of our own American framers.

The republican response to Hobbesianism consisted first, therefore, in a denial of the factual validity of Hobbes' claim that civic order can be maintained without civility. But the republican counterattack had a second and even more important objective, though one that was less often expressed: to restore the dignity and importance of civility itself, which Hobbes had reduced to a hobby, to an activity gratifying to its practitioners, perhaps, but unnecessary to the production of any real or lasting good. The eighteenth century champions of republicanism were men who loved politics, who possessed a passion for political life and found in it deep personal meaning, who understood instinctively the priority of values implied by Machiavelli's famous statement that he loved the city of Florence more than his own soul, and who were

revolted by the trivializing view of civility that Hobbes advanced. For them, political life could never be a hobby, and the energy of their opposition to Hobbesianism derived above all else from their desire to see the passion for public action, which they felt so keenly themselves, restored to its classical grandeur.

It is obvious that some human beings feel this passion intensely and that it is connected, for them, to the deepest purposes of life. What is less clear is the source of their passion and the reasons for its intensity. From whence do the pleasures of citizenship spring and why are these pleasures, for some at least, so strong? I have said that, on a classical view, civility is a pleasure in its own right, an art whose exercise yields intrinsic satisfaction to the person who possesses it. But what exactly is this pleasure and how can we explain the remarkable ferocity with which certain human beings pursue it, sometimes to the exclusion of all else, including, as Machiavelli says, the good of their own souls?

The pleasures of citizenship include, first, the pleasure of being seen and making an impression on others, the pleasure of fame. The wish to be seen and admired is a universal human desire. According to Hannah Arendt, it is the root of all political action, the passion that drives us out of the darkness and anonymity of private life into the theatre of the public space. But there is a second pleasure that political action affords, different and deeper than this one: the pleasure of being connected to, or of participating in, something enduring.

We are all mortal creatures, given only a limited time on earth. We lack permanence, and this is our most basic and telling deficiency; all of our other deficiencies are aspects or products of this one. Hence what we long for most intensely, Plato tells us in the *Symposium*, is the thing we most decisively lack: endurance, immortality, a longevity beyond our span of years. In every human soul, he says, there is a longing to be joined with something more permanent than ourselves. Toward the end of the *Symposium*, Socrates recounts a speech he claims to have heard from the priestess Diotima, years before when he was himself a young man.⁶ Among other things, Diotima describes the different forms that the human longing for permanence assumes. We all share this longing,

⁶ PLATO, SYMPOSIUM 201d-212b.

she says, but different people pursue it in different ways. Some people—the great majority of human beings—satisfy the longing to endure beyond their deaths by leaving an image of themselves behind in the form of children (a physical image, but more importantly, a psychical image, descendants that possess one's habits and values as well as physique). Others, by contrast, pursue permanence through political activity, by taking a part in the lives of their cities, which are not fated to die in the same way that individual human beings are, and by attempting to leave a mark of some sort on their laws and institutions. Finally, Diotima says, some people, the smallest number of all, satisfy the human longing for permanence through the study of immortal truth, which lasts forever—through philosophy, science and religion.

One might argue that in a balanced life there should be room for all three of these pursuits, and that they are complementary rather than competitive. But Diotima suggests something different. The three immortalizing activities she describes must be ranked hierarchically, Diotima insists, according to their ability to satisfy the desire that stimulates them in the first place. Judged by this criterion, the first (procreation) must be ranked lowest and the third (philosophy, science and religion) highest, with politics somewhere in between. Only the third, on Diotima's view, is truly capable of satisfying the human longing for permanence because only it connects us to something that not merely outlasts us but endures forever. The most fulfilling life, according to Diotima, is therefore a life devoted centrally, perhaps even exclusively, to the pursuit of truth and in which family and political attachments are sharply downgraded or ignored. This is not a balanced way of life but one marked by a certain kind of extremism instead (a way of life exemplified, many have thought, by Socrates' own career). To have this best of all possible lives, it is necessary that one actively resist the pull of family and city, that one fight against the temptation to pursue immortality in either of these other (defective and incomplete) ways. Thus, on Diotima's view, the three paths by which human beings seek immortality not only differ in value or worth, but compete with one another for our loyalty and energy and support. They cannot, in the end, be harmonized in a well-balanced life but are perpetually at war, pulling us in different and inconsistent directions, as Machiavelli recognized in one way when he placed the welfare of his city before that of his soul, and E.M. Forster acknowledged in another when

he remarked that if he had to choose between saving his country and saving his friend, he hoped he would have the courage to save his friend.

Diotima (Socrates) is a partisan of the philosophical life. In her threefold scheme, the life of politics occupies a middle and hence subordinate place. For some, however, this middle path has an irresistible appeal, and their longing to join something lasting takes the form, above all else, of a love of political action, a desire to participate in the art of civil government, a public-spirited willingness to place the good of their political communities above all other interests, including their own individual welfare. These are the true lovers of politics, and for them the claims of the political realm take precedence over those of the family, on the one side, and of philosophy, science and religion on the other. For them the highest good, the one whose pursuit most fully satisfies their yearning for permanence, is the good of the political communities to which they belong, and the greatest pleasure they know is the pleasure of civility.

To a large degree, of course, the relative attraction that each of Diotima's three paths holds for a given individual is a matter of personal temperament, education and the like, and hence of luck or chance. Still, the lovers of each are able to make a case on its behalf. The case for the third path, for a life devoted to the pursuit of immortal truth, is made by Diotima herself with a simplicity and force that can never be improved upon. The case for the life of politics is harder to construct. It rests at bottom on two claims.

First, every cultural activity, even those of a nonpolitical sort, can be carried on in a sustained way only within a political community bound together by laws. In the absence of such a community, in what Hobbes calls a state of nature, there can be, as he observes, "no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving, and removing, such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society."⁷ All these require the security of the laws as a condition of their existence. The whole realm of human culture is, in this sense, a political phenomenon, for it can only come into being within a political setting—even those

⁷ THOMAS HOBBS, *LEVIATHAN* 82 (Michael Oakeshott ed., 1946).

cultural activities that are unconcerned with politics itself. Philosophy, for example, aims at something beyond the realm of politics and yet, as Socrates acknowledged, the activity of philosophizing exists only in cities. Similarly, family life, in anything but a biological sense, is impossible outside the protective orbit of the laws. To the extent that relations among family members are defined by the bonds of marriage, inheritance and the like; that parents not only produce their children but seek to educate them as well; and that the members of a family are able to create a collective identity for themselves, enduring over many generations, the family is a cultural institution whose existence depends (like that of every other) on the establishment of political order, even though its own aims are completely unpolitical in nature. Thus each of the other immortalizing activities that Diotima describes—the pursuit of truth and the rearing of children—is possible only within the political space which the art of civil government creates, so that this last activity, the second in Diotima's scheme, may rightly be said to have at least an existential priority over the other two. This is the first claim on which the defense of the life of politics rests.

The second is that there is something distinctively human about this life, and that its affirmation is, in a special way, an affirmation of the human condition itself. The life of philosophy may enable one to participate, if only fleetingly, in something truly immortal (that is the reason Diotima gives for judging it the best life of all), but the divine things that last forever lie beyond the human realm, from which the practitioners of philosophy detach themselves to live, intermittently at least, the life of a god. The pleasures of philosophy are, in this respect, inhuman. So, too, one might say, are the pleasures of procreation, though in their case the enjoyment is less than human, not more. Human procreation of course includes a cultural component missing in the lives of other living things, but its cultural features are all built upon, and woven around, our animal sexuality. Aristotle tells us that every animal achieves a measure of immortality by participating in the life of its species through sexual reproduction, and though human reproduction has a cultural dimension too, a large part of the pleasure of parenthood consists in the animal joy of being carried along in the endless current of birth and death that constitutes the life of the species. This joy is intense, but other animals share it, just as the gods share the intense joy of

contemplation; in neither case is the pleasure distinctively human.

The most distinctive human pleasure is that associated with the intermediate activity of lawmaking, the art of building cities, which—to invoke Aristotle once again—animals cannot create and the gods do not require. To practice this art in a loving way is thus to affirm the activity that most directly embodies the human condition, suspended between the spheres of animal and divine existence. The cities that men and women build with the art of civil government rise up above the metabolic routines of animal life. They show that among the earth's creatures we alone have spiritual ambitions. But, like everything on earth, the cities that we build are liable to decay; they rise and fall, and disappear from view. They are touched by our own mortality, by the impermanence we share with other earthly creatures. Nothing displays our composite human nature more compellingly, therefore, than the realm of politics, and the pleasure that a life of politics affords is the pleasure of embracing our humanity on its own terms instead of seeking release from it in something of a higher or lower sort. This is a tragic pleasure because the human condition is defined by an ambition for permanence that cannot be fulfilled within the limits of human life, but only by escaping these limits, in an upward or downward direction, into the mindless eternity of animal existence or the eternity of thought in which God presumably dwells. The life of politics is thus a distinctively human life—the most human of the three Diotima mentions—and the pleasure which the true lover of politics finds in it is a tragic pleasure that is likely to seem, to those who feel it intensely, the satisfaction most suited to our impossible condition (which is perhaps why Athens made tragedy its civic religion and why every anti-humanistic thinker, from Plato on, has found the realm of politics deficient).

This is the case for the life of politics, for civility, as the best among the lives Diotima describes. In every society, a small number of people will be passionately drawn to this life, and find their deepest pleasures in it. And in every society, some among the rest will periodically enter the political realm for brief periods of time, while others never engage in public life at all. For a few people, civility is a ruling passion, but for most it is likely to be, at best, an intermittent one. For them, the human longing to participate in something lasting, to be connected to something that endures, is mainly satisfied by

involvement in the lives of their families, on the one hand, and by pursuit of eternal truth on the other (which, for most people, takes the form of religious truth and its concomitant, personal salvation). In the lives of this large group of people (the majority by far), the longing for permanence is certainly not absent. It merely assumes a non-political form, except on those occasions when a public-spirited desire to take part in the business of government for the sake of contributing to an enterprise of lasting worth wells up, stimulated, perhaps, by a private interest but eventually outgrowing it to become a longing for the good of the community as a whole: the longing that every true lover of politics feels. Most of the time, however, most people are not true lovers of politics in this sense and during the long intervals when their pursuit of permanence takes other forms, their attitude toward the realm of politics is likely to be an instrumental one only. The only thing they are likely to want from politics, during these periods, is the advancement of their interests (including, of course, their interest in securing immortality by other means). In contrast to the lover of politics, whose desire for connection with something lasting is satisfied in political action itself, these others view it merely as a tool for satisfying this same desire in non-political ways, and after every episode of real citizenship, in which they feel temporarily moved by the spirit of the political realm, this is the instrumental view of it to which they return.

Today, however, there is a diminishing appetite in our country even for citizenship of this episodic kind. An increasing number of Americans are incapable of being roused, even for brief periods of time, out of their habit of viewing the political sphere as anything but a forum for the advancement of other, non-political interests of one kind or another, and into seeing its issues in a genuinely public-spirited way. This decrease in the appetite for citizenship is the real crisis of civility in America today, and it correlates with an increasing devotion to family and church, the two other (non-political) institutions in which contemporary Americans act most forcefully on their longing to be connected with something of greater durability than themselves. Indeed, these two institutions are now loosely joined under the banner of "family values," a program that is partly familial and partly religious in character. The program of family values does not celebrate the sovereignty of the individual or the transient pleasures of material life; indeed, it is sharply opposed to these things.

What it celebrates instead, in both its familial and religious aspects, is the pleasure of belonging to something larger and more permanent than oneself. But it disjoins this pleasure from the realm of politics, which it treats in a strictly instrumental fashion as a tool for promoting the two other paths by which human beings seek a sense of permanence in their lives. The longing for permanence is universal. It takes different forms, however, and these compete for our allegiance. In most people's lives, it takes the form of true civility, of a public-spirited devotion to the good of the political realm for its own sake, only occasionally and for limited periods of time. But in recent years, even this limited love of politics has sharply decreased among us, as our energies and loyalties have shifted to other, non-political forms of self-immortalization. The loss of civility in America that so many decry does not consist in an increase of rudeness, vulgarity and the like. It consists in this loss of political appetite, in a diminishment of the love of political action for its own sake, that Diotima identifies as the middle path to immortality and which, until quite recently, had at least an occasional grip on the American people but today grows steadily weaker as its competitors, joined under the flag of family values, gain in strength.

Several different developments have contributed to the decline of civility in this sense. One, perhaps the most important, is the disappearance from American politics of issues of transcendent importance, of issues that make it plain to everyone involved that political action is not simply about the pursuit of private interest but values of enduring significance too, values that touch the country's deepest and most lasting aspirations, so that in taking a stand on these issues one is participating in a public venture of real permanence and not just the transient, kaleidoscopic competition of private claims. In the postwar period, two issues of this sort stood out above all others. The first was the battle against communism, a commitment, on our part, of world historical significance, that guided and gave transcendent meaning to our entire foreign policy over a forty year period; and the second was the civil rights movement, which conferred on many aspects of domestic policy (desegregation, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the War on Poverty, and so on) a similar sense of connection to enduring values, anchored in the bedrock of the republic, that rose above the constantly changing scene of everyday interests to something more permanent. But the battle against communism is now over, and the only orienting principle that

has been offered to replace it is some still-undefined notion of vital national interests, which hardly possesses the grandeur and permanence of our earlier fight against what Reinhold Niebuhr called “a demonic religio-political creed,”⁸ and Ronald Reagan described as the “evil empire.” And, so far as the civil rights movement is concerned, what began as a great moral crusade of enduring significance has now degenerated, in many people’s view of it, into a contest of private interests, a change that occurred as the movement shifted from its original emphasis on rights to a concern with remedies, in the form of busing, affirmative action and the like. The fight against communism and the civil rights movement both drew inspiration, of course, from religious sources, from values beyond the realm of politics. But each was, at its heart, a political movement aimed at creating (or preserving) a certain form of public life, not just for instrumental reasons but also for its own sake, as something good in itself—in sharp contrast, for example, to Pat Robertson’s Christian Coalition, whose political interventions are strictly strategic. Together these two campaigns gave American politics in the postwar period a connection to something more permanent than the ceaseless conflict of private claims, and their disappearance has created a vacuum in which it is harder to satisfy the longing for such a connection through political action. Even the debate over the budget, which at first seemed responsive to this longing, has now degenerated into a contest of interests in which nothing of transcendent value is at stake. As a result, the desire for a connection to something permanent, no longer finding opportunities for fulfillment in the realm of politics, today seeks satisfaction in the non-political spheres of family and church instead.

The transformation of the American party system, through well-meaning but misguided reforms, has also contributed to the weakening of our appetite for political action in any but an instrument sense. Our two parties of course represent various interest group constituencies, which view them as means for the advancement of their own social and economic programs. To some extent, however, our political parties have always also been vehicles of public-spirited concern, and from time to time this has been their primary function. But the latter dimension of party politics—its public-spirited dimen-

⁸ REINHOLD NIEBUHR, *THE IRONY OF AMERICAN HISTORY* 3 (1952).

sion—has weakened considerably in recent years. The Democratic Party no longer has a guiding vision of any kind to which it can appeal as a ground for support beyond its traditional constituencies, and the Republican vision is largely the product of a dogmatic religious fundamentalism which its proponents show no desire to expand into a more ecumenical political morality that large numbers of Americans outside their ranks might endorse. As a result, many now believe that both parties have been captured by narrow factional interests and that any broad based public-spirited movement must begin outside the structure of our present two party system. Ironically, this state of affairs has been hastened by reforms in party organization undertaken a quarter century ago to make the selection of presidential candidates more open and democratic—less manipulable by party potentates brokering deals in smoke-filled rooms at their national conventions—but which has actually strengthened the hold that well-organized interest groups have on party politics by giving primary elections a determining influence that all but eliminates real deliberative opportunities for the formulation, at the national level, of party programs that rise above narrow interest group concerns and for the selection of candidates sufficiently independent to defend such programs in a convincing way. Those who under other circumstances might be drawn into a public-spirited campaign for the common good are therefore likely to find their appetite for civility thwarted by the limited opportunities that party politics today affords, and so long as the barriers to organizing a third party remain high, the desire for connection to something lasting, which their appetite for civility expresses, will flow in other, non-political directions.

The growing commercialization of the legal profession has been a third factor contributing to the decline of civility in America. Lawyers have always played a large role in our public life, and the love of politics has always been particularly strong among them. Those with an appetite for politics have generally been drawn to the law as a career and, more than other pursuits, the practice of law itself stimulates a passion for political action. But the practice of law, especially in the upper reaches of the bar, has in the last twenty years become an almost purely commercial activity that offers fewer and fewer opportunities for the expression of public-spiritedness, on a scale large or small, and decreasing encouragement to its cultivation in the first place. Lovers of politics in the past found in the profession of law a vocation well-matched to their

desires: a setting in which to satisfy their love of public life, and to act the part of citizen even in their private dealings with clients. But the opportunities to do this are decreasing and the incentives lawyers face (both material and honorific) now all run in the opposite direction. Today, in fact, the passion for public life is more likely to be thwarted than gratified in the practice of law, and the obstruction of this important vocational outlet for the spirit of civility is one more reason why the desire that drives it now seeks satisfaction in the non-political realms of family and church instead.

Finally, one might speculate about the impact on civility of television, the most powerful cultural force in the world today. In a recent and widely-discussed series of empirical studies, the Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam has persuasively documented a decline in the frequency with which Americans join groups and organizations of all sorts. (His essay “Bowling Alone”, for example, describes a sharp decrease in the percentage of bowlers who bowl in leagues rather than by themselves.)⁹ This decline in group participation is an age-related phenomenon, according to Putnam. Those born after World War II, who grew up in the 1950s, show a markedly lower tendency to join groups of any kind than their parents and grandparents, who came of age during the first half of the century. This is an interesting datum in its own right, but what is even more revealing is the fact that, among those in the post-War generation, the rate of group participation is most strongly correlated (among the variables Putnam tested) with television viewing: the more you watch television, Putnam’s studies show, the less likely you are to participate in organized group activities outside the home. Newspaper readers, on the whole, show a higher rate of participation than television watchers, and “light” television watchers a higher rate than “heavy” consumers (those who spend more time each week in front of the set).

This is only a correlation, of course, but there are plausible reasons for thinking that the relationship has some causal significance too. First, and most importantly, television in this country is overwhelmingly commercial, which means that most shows, no matter how thoughtful or public-spirited, are

⁹ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital*, 6 J. OF DEMOCRACY 65 (1995).

interrupted every fifteen minutes or so by a commercial message whose aim is to remind the viewer of some unsatisfied material (and often bodily) need. The effect of these messages is to jolt the viewer out of whatever other-directed reverie he or she may briefly have been lost in, and back to the realm of need, which is self-centered by its nature. Viewers of television are never permitted, for very long, to think about anything but themselves, and this constant and unremitting insistence on the primacy of personal needs encourages a kind of autism that destroys the spirit of selflessness on which, to some degree at least, all group activities depend. (In this respect, newspaper reading encourages very different habits, for although newspapers contain commercial advertisements, these are not set into the text of articles themselves and do not force the reader to interrupt his reading in the way that television commercials force viewers to interrupt their watching, even those whose remote controls permit them to mute their sets until the program resumes.)

Second (driven largely, perhaps, by the need for frequent commercial interruptions), most television shows are divided into brief, self-contained episodes that must have a dramatic completeness of no more than a few minutes duration. Even public television shows are often divided in this way into brief units of meaning, as anyone who has ever watched more than a few minutes of "Sesame Street" can attest. The fragmented, episodic skits on "Sesame Street" are in fact a perfect preparation for the five minute dramas of MTV, which are in turn a preparation for the sound-bite culture of the evening news. At every stage along the way, from childhood to adolescence to adulthood, television habituates the viewer to expect that meaningful messages can be delivered in a few minutes time and weakens the capacity to absorb messages of a longer and more complex kind—that is, it shortens the viewer's attention span. Again, the contrast with reading is obvious and the effect on political action predictably negative, for unlike bodily needs, which require no deliberation (and therefore no time) to discover, the meaning of the public good is always a subject of deliberative debate that takes time and hence demands of its participants an attention span longer and calmer than the one television watching produces (not to mention a degree of activity which the hypnotic passivity of television profoundly discourages).

It is thus reasonable to think that an increase in television viewing causes a decline in civility, and that Americans'

appetite for public action has decreased because the number of hours they spend watching television has gone up. To the other reasons for the loss of civility in America, this one must therefore be added. But it is important to remember that what Putnam's studies show is a decline not merely in the frequency with which Americans join *political* groups but the frequency with which they join groups of any kind at all—social and religious as well as political—and in this more general phenomenon lies a clue, perhaps, to a crisis even deeper than the crisis of civility that has been my subject here. For what is perhaps most remarkable about the period in which we now find ourselves is the weakening of the desire for permanence not only in the realm of politics but across the full range of human pursuits. However you measure it, for example, family stability is on the decline, and though religious feeling may seem to be increasing, much of it now finds expression in movements, like the Promise Keepers and the Million Man March, that are likely, after a brief existence, to disappear and leave no lasting organizational or spiritual residue behind. What one sees today, in each of the spheres that Diotima describes, is a slackening of the appetite for permanence, of the desire to be joined, through procreation or citizenship or the worship of God, to something more lasting than one's self. Each of these modes of immortalization requires the individual to go out of himself and submit to something else. Each might be described, therefore, as a form of sacrifice, whose aim is to secure a life beyond the limits our own mortality imposes, and the general failure of the appetite for permanence that defines our world today is characterized by the dominance of an attitude of exactly the opposite kind, an attitude of self-absorption rather than self-sacrifice, which tends, at its limit, toward the momentary and fragmented existence of a creature given over entirely to the satisfaction of its bodily appetites and uninterested in establishing a link to anything of greater durability beyond the circle of its own transient needs: the existence of a television watching couch potato who no longer feels an interest in joining any group at all, who bowls alone wherever he goes, whose passion for immortality—in any place, at any time, of any form—is dead.

But how can this be? The human desire for immortality springs from our greatest deficiency and the longing to repair it. It is a part of human nature. If human nature has not changed—if we are still the same sort of creature that Diotima described—how can the passion for immortality be dying

among us (a death of which the death of civility is merely an aspect)? Perhaps the answer lies in the transience of our civilization.

The plain fact is that our civilization cannot continue in its present form. The earth's endowment of fossil fuels will soon be spent, and when it is, another form of life, unimaginably different from our own, must arise to replace it. We all know this and feel it every day at some unacknowledged level of perception, whenever we drive a car, or turn on a computer, or telephone a friend. The world that we inhabit wears the sign of doom on its brow, and we all know this in our hearts. "Abraham, or some old peasant of the past," Max Weber writes, "died 'old and satiated with life' because he stood in the organic cycle of life."¹⁰ Life for Abraham had meaning because it was connected to a world he knew to be enduring. He lived every day of his life in the knowledge that the world would always be as it was that day, and had been in the past. Even fifty years ago, most of mankind lived in this knowledge. But for us it is no longer possible to believe in good faith that our world will endure. We know that it is transient and must pass away—a knowledge that is the last fine fruit of those discoveries that transformed the earth itself, and the stars above, from the "visible eternal" that Aristotle saw into wasting assets spoiled, in Rilke's words, by the "flicker" of time;¹¹ and that is intensified by the rapidity with which the circumstances of everyday life are today changing for the majority of human beings, a pace of change that assures, as George Kennan somewhere observes, that most people now die in a world radically different from the one into which they were born.

Our civilization is the most materially comfortable the world has ever known, but it is also the least permanent, and the awareness that this is so must cause in the souls of ordinary human beings a deep and anxious doubt about the meaning of their lives which depends, in the end, on the possibility of their participation in something more lasting than themselves. If we knew how to restore some measure of permanence to our world, these doubts might again resume their familiar dimensions. But we do not know how to do this, for the human world today appears to those who inhabit its

¹⁰ Max Weber, *Science as a Vocation*, in FROM MAX WEBER: ESSAYS IN SOCIOLOGY 140 (H.H. Gerth & C. Wright Mills eds., 1958).

¹¹ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Aus dem Nachlass des Grafen C.W.*, First Series, Poem X.

most advanced regions to be driven by forces beyond our control, and since we are unable to make the world more permanent, what we have done instead is to conceal from ourselves the anxiety that its transience stirs in our souls. We have done this by suppressing the longing for permanence itself, through a narcotized consumerism that draws the boundaries of the world to coincide with those of our bodily needs and that leaves each of us wrapped in a separate cocoon, rocking back and forth between appetite and satisfaction, uninterested in connecting to anything beyond the magic circle of the self—the state of the soul that Putnam's studies describe.

We have done this but I do not think—I cannot believe—that we shall ever succeed entirely, for our longing to be joined with something that endures is irrepressible and all our efforts to destroy this longing only point to its immense, frustrated power. One day, some day, the world will change even if we are not the ones who change it, and the longing for permanence, which is as old as the human soul, will once again find in the world a hopeful measure of endurance. Then this longing will emerge out of its unhappy suppression and all the old ways of pursuing immortality that Diotima describes will once again revive, including the love of public life that constitutes the true heart of civility. For the love of politics, like the love of children and God, may be discouraged and suppressed but it can never truly be lost.

